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Getting There

Gloria Ohland

THREE FOR TV

Cable is livening up, I swear. There are some really good homegrown shows on TV now, even in the ghetto-land of public access. To wit: *Li'l Art's Poker Party* (on public access, channel 14), *The Cutting Edge* (on MTV), and coming soon, *Scratch TV* (on Progressive Cable, which airs on leased-access channels such as Group W's 10). But first, Art Fein's *Poker Party*, a "show of joviality and journalism."

LI'L ART'S POKER PARTY

It's an exaggeration to compare this with early Steve Allen talk shows, but one similarity is more striking than any of the obvious differences — the "liveness" of the show and its adventurous exploration of a new communications medium. Art Fein is just a regular sort of guy — one-time publicist for Capitol Records, rockabilly night DJ at the Lingerie, and a man who has been hanging around the music scene for years (and who was responsible for last year's local rockabilly compilation on Rhino Records) — who pays his $35 to Group W Cable and invites his friends on down to discuss cultural affairs.

The vehicle for conversation is a poker party, hosted by Fein and guested by the likes of *Reader* columnist Richard Meltzer, *Herald Examiner* music critic Todd Everett, and Brendan Mullen or Phast Phreddie or Mary Woronov. A new card game is introduced, betting begins, and they engage in the kind of conversation one might be expected to engage in at a poker game. (There have been problems with the censors so they've taken to using props — "Why don't you take a leek, Richard?" the disgruntled host may exclaim, handing Meltzer the large green vegetable.)

Everyone smokes cigars, pages through magazines such as the *Weekly*, *Calendar*, *Billboard*, *Collier's*, and *Sumo Wrestler World*, and discusses topical subjects. "Have you seen the new '52 Mercs?" Art Fein asks no one in particular, while Meltzer sneers over a Robert Hilburn review of an Elvis Costello show. Proof positive is cited that the Beach Boys didn't write "Barbara Ann," even though a *L.A. Times* story quotes a girl who says they did, and the critics crit each other: "Hey, the guy who writes those 'get rid of Meltzer' letters ought to write your column." Meanwhile, constantly changing subtitles are superimposed under each guest as the camera pans to them. "Art Fein, Currently Unemployed," and "Todd Everett, Girls! He's Single!" and "Richard Meltzer, author of *War and Peace*."

Everybody talks over everybody else, and there are plenty of gaffes and avenues of conversation leading nowhere. But sometimes the show shines, as in Brendan Mullen's impromptu satiric diatribe on how to make it on the L.A. music scene in a "roots American music" band: "We'd start by opening up for Los Lobos at the Music Machine, and maybe Dave Alvin would be hanging out. And we would ask Gene Taylor to play piano and he'd say no. But Bill Bateman would be there and he'd recommend us to Uncle Phil . . . and while hanging out with the Blasters backstage we'd meet Michael Hiatt, who would invite us to a poetry reading at Richard Duardo's studio downtown. Exene would be there and she would really like my poems and we would get to open for X at the Greek Theater. Everybody would like us, including Tito of the Plugz and Chris Morris, because we'd be 'one-up American music' . . . We'd get a deal with Slash and then do a compilation on Rhino . . . "

"Didn't *you* ever want to do a TV show?" Art asks me, hitting the nail on the head. (Doesn't everybody?) "Well you can fulfill that wish for $35."

"Cable is getting better, I'm seeing more funny stuff all the time. I hope this show is a catalyst for other nuts in the Hollywood music scene." (The show airs whenever Group W feels like scheduling it.)

Gary Leonard

Richard Meltzer, Art Fein, Todd Everett, Phast Phreddie and Paul Body (l to r) shoot the breeze on Li'l Art's Poker Party.

Klaus Willie of Neo 80 on IRS' Cutting Edge.

Edge directors Valerie Faris and Jonathan Dayton, on the editing board.

Gary Leonard

IRS' CUTTING EDGE

The Cutting Edge, on the other hand, is an artful, $30,000 I would guess, half-hour affair supported by IRS Records. This show could be as bad as MTV (sorry — you say you like MTV?), but it's very good, and treats its subjects — music scenesters, street people and entertainers — and audience with dignity. I would guess this is due in part to the documentary filmmaking skills and approach of its directors Valerie Faris and Jonathan Dayton, a UCLA film school graduate who together with Faris ended up making music videos for the record companies.

They see the interviews they do with bands as "portraits," and take a creative approach: John Doe and Exene Cervenka do a monologue while driving down Hollywood Boulevard in a rusty, rented Cadillac: "This is the old house we used to live in," John says. "It had a lovely backyard and a lot of flies." And later, "The best thing about Los Angeles is that it doesn't have an identity, and people detest it. It's just a big scummy place where people can do what they want to do. I like that it's all confused. It's good to be in the heart of the beast."

(New TV star?) Brendan Mullen re-enters the boarded-up Masque (of which he was proprietor) after five years, and takes a trip down Memory Lane in a segment cut with clips of the Weirdos doing a wild show at the underground club back in the good old days. Grandmaster Flash provides a step-by-step how-to guide on break/mixing records. A segment on the Mysterious Dance Company takes the video crew down to the Watts Towers for a lesson in pop-locking. There are poetry segments featuring rock star/poets like Henry Rollins, who incites ever larger audiences to riot with poems like his angry invective against family life in "Family Man." ("We got a lot of letters from the Midwest about Henry," Valerie says.)

Moderators for the show have included the unlikely — like Tony La Ventura, who does a rhinestone cowboy Las Vegas-type nightclub act. And the cameras have brought into homes across middle America a behind-the-scenes look at the underside of urban life, going into clubs such as New York City's Pyramid Club, an "experimental theater" and transvestite hangout.

People on the street are included wherever possible. For example, the proprietors of the Hotel Iroquois (where all the rock stars now stay in NYC) describe their clients: "I know the Clash, they're real quiet fellows," says owner Lou Poleski. And "some of them have weird names like Iggy Pop — sounds like some kind of ice cream."

The show's budget limitations work to its advantage, as *The Cutting Edge* provides an effective counterpoint to the onslaught of bizarre images that populate current rock videos. "With our budget we have to find sets that are already there and then incorporate drama," says Valerie. "Rock videos provide a context that has nothing to do with reality. It's nice to see that these musicians exist in the world."

The creative director is Carl Grasso of IRS. The cameraman is (oftentimes) Peter Smokler, who is responsible for shooting such other gems as the Loud family's portrait of *An American Family*, and *Spinal Tap*. (*Cutting Edge* is shown the last Sunday of each month at 8:30 p.m.)

SCRATCH TV

And last but not least: *Scratch TV*. I remember the days when Reuben Lopez was making Super-Eight movies at a friend's house. He wrote the scripts, and he and his friends filmed each other. Now Reuben's got his own show, based on the bimonthly, Xeroxed *Scratch* magazine, which covers the comings and goings of the in crowd.

The scene of the first show will be a benefit for Scratch with three bands at the Lingerie on the 24th. Be there and you'll probably be on TV. In addition to the live footage of the crowd and (guess which) popular L.A. bands, the half-hour-long show will include Attila giving someone a Mohawk, the Screaming Sirens doing their "Yethur!" shtick, Teresa putting on her makeup, Connie Parente putting on tons of jewelry, and Tex cooking up some fried eggs. There'll be a scratch battle of the DJs — including Ron Miller, KK, and the Glove; a Melrose fashion show; fast clips of the Hollywood sign, Tower Records, Capitol Records, and other Hollywood landmarks; and a trip inside the Lhasa Club, the Cathay and the Lingerie. Zachary will host. (The series of four to eight shows will air sometime in June.)

Gary Leonard

Join the in crowd on Scratch TV. Danny Shades gives Teresa a girlfriend application, as Cinzia Zanetti applies makeup. Anthony Fischer directs. Reuben Lopez and friend watch, and David West shoots (right to left).

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